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Separating the wheat from the chaff: A response

Published : 12:00 am April 7, 2016 | 738 views | No comments so far |  | E-mail to friend

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“ The Goebbels theory of repeating a lie ad nauseam till it eventually rests as the truth was exploited to the full successfully. Fantastic amounts stacked away abroad, ownership of Sri Lanka Insurance, Lanka Hospitals, former Australian HC bungalow in Cambridge Place are only a few of the numerous examples of mud slogans. As for dangling carrots, we have the Volkswagen factory that was about to start, a car for every family, a clean administration and so on. And now we have demonstrations everywhere on multiple issues with those who claimed to possess the ‘magic wand’ then passing the buck conveniently to the Rajapaksa regime. As for the assurance of media freedom, violent criticism of the media in Parliament, naming journalists with veiled threats and if proof of the pudding is in the eating, stringent penalties incorporated in the ‘Right to Information Bill’ for journalists

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By I.P.C. Mendis

The Guest Column bearing the title 'Separating the wheat from the chaff' authored by Srinath Fernando which appeared in the Daily FT of 30 March portends to pose the question whether "missing the wood for the trees" is as bad if not worse than not "separating the wheat from the chaff".

Indeed, both raise rhetorical questions which are debatable "till the cows come home". It is not the intention in this piece to attempt to cross swords with his well-intentioned thoughts but mainly to get the record straight.

Role of the media

To start with, Srinath seeks to be too idealistic. He apportions blame to the media as well. He quite rightly links political deception to rhetoric – "the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques".

Rhetoric, he argues, is "often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content". He continues: "Rhetoric is the art of using ethos, pathos and logos and this is widely made use of by the media personnel and institutions".

Yes, indeed with the proliferation of print, electronic and audio media institutions, the people in Sri Lanka, now have an opportunity to compare the competing values and to "separate the wheat from the chaff" if they are keen to retain independence of thought.

We have hardly reached that stage and tend to be swayed by other mundane considerations, especially at election time and even after, to justify what is blatantly unjustifiable. Depending on persuasive techniques, the public at large are often prone to swallow hook, line and sinker a particular canard if conveyed in persuasive manner.

Were they not carried away by the so-called daily baths said to have been given by seven virgins to a past President? In fact, this was pointedly quoted by Tissa Attanayake when he was General Secretary of the UNP while announcing the establishment of a special committee headed by Mangala Samaraweera to disseminate fallacies against the Rajapaksa Government. The mud slogans did really stick!

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As for dangling carrots, we have the Volkswagen factory that was about to start, a car for every family, a clean administration and so on. And now we have demonstrations everywhere on multiple issues with those who claimed to possess the 'magic wand' then passing the buck conveniently to the Rajapaksa regime.

As for the assurance of media freedom, violent criticism of the media in Parliament, naming journalists with veiled threats and if proof of the pudding is in the eating, stringent penalties incorporated in the 'Right

to Information Bill' for journalists. The tendency is to convert the media to the standard of the Government gazette in substitution of white vans!

Political deception

One has to agree with Srinath Fernando about the continued use of political deception from whatever quarter it comes and the need to identify "rhetoric". While identifying such malady, one has to be very careful in not falling into the same pitfalls unwittingly if one is not to be told – "Physician heal thyself". It is unfortunate that the author had to refer to the Mattala Airport. His reference to ex-President Rajapaksa's statement about Mattala deriving income from aircraft over-flying it is definitely out of context and seemingly in puerile jest. This income is purely incidental and an additional revenue to other direct avenues when in successful operation.

The fact remains that anyone with a knowledge of aviation will realise that a second international airport was a dire necessity for decades as any problems at Katunayake, including labour, would necessitate aircraft to be diverted to Chennai and aircraft always carried extra fuel for such eventuality. Now with Mattala they could carry extra cargo instead of fuel profitably. The usefulness was amply demonstrated very recently when there was thick mist over Katunayake and Mattala came to the rescue.

One can have difference of opinion on the location and that is different. Perhaps, one was political as in the instance of the proposed IT facility at Homagama with South Korean aid and 28 acres in place that is reported to have been stopped to be located in Kuliapitiya, the electorate of the present Minister of Education. In fairness, however, there had been considerations of having Mattala linked to a FTZ, its proximity to the Hambantota Port and tourist development potential.

Projects such as these have a very long gestation period. It is a crime and a crying shame that in a bid for vindictive cynical consideration, warehouses at Mattala was permitted to be utilised to store paddy (after selling off years ago Agrarian Services paddy stores to cronies).

For economic development there needs to be mission and vision and aggressive marketing techniques. If there was the nuisance of elephants and peacocks sometimes invading it, there was an induced worse situation where there was the real danger from rats, insects and birds, etc. all being attracted, causing perhaps irreparable damage to facilities and equipment to a vital and invaluable asset. And now there is wild boar.

If these projects were unnecessary, why are the UNP and CBK falling over each other to claim paternity to the ideas? CBK claims the blueprint for the Southern Expressway. Yes, there was much verbal diarrhoea then with an architect Chairman heading the Southern Development Authority but confined only to big talk. It was the same with Norochchola. She got cold feet.

Missing the wood for the trees

Srinath Fernando is entitled to have his favourites who try to impress with "Surangana Katha". It is

relevant to relate in this connection a fine submission I heard in the Appeal Court recently made by a leading President's Counsel when he silenced a State Counsel politely that sound and fury is not a substitute for substance.

Indeed, if there is anyone who does not see merit in clean cities, jogging tracks, environmental beauty, strict discipline, and the defeat of the LTTE against a world accepted concept of invincibility, he is entitled to his blinkers. If anyone does not respect economic principles but prefer to play to the gallery, he can continue to draw satisfaction but refrain from missing the wood for the trees and unwittingly perpetuate the causes against which he rightly purports to be against. Rhetoric can mislead, yes indeed, but truth has to prevail however much it is bitter!